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Harris - Memoir of T.W. Harris - 1892

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OF

THADDEUS WILLIAM HARRIS, M.D.

BY

EDWARD DOUBLEDAY HARRIS

MEMOIR

OF

THADDEUS WILLIAM HARRIS, M.D.

BY

EDWARD D. HARRIS

REPRINTED FROM VOLUME XIX. OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE
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MEMOIR.

In the second volume of the Fourth Series of the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society may be read a memoir of the Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris, D.D., from the pen of his friend and associate, Dr. Nathaniel L. Frothingham.

It would be difficult to find two men more unlike in many of their prominent traits than the clergyman of Dorchester and his as well-known son, Thaddeus William Harris, M.D., the subject of this notice.

Both were members of this Society, — the elder elected in 1792, the seventeenth on the list, retaining his association with the Society for half a century, when it terminated with his death ; — the younger elected in 1848, and dying in membership eight years afterward.

Both were men of untiring industry in their respective pursuits, of equal thoroughness, precision, and accuracy in their literary work. Each reached distinction in his chosen calling as much through the exercise of these qualities as from remarkable genius. The attentive reader of Dr. Frothingham's memoir of the elder man might wonder that such a father could beget such a son, but the mystery is explained when he learns from the same source the character of the mother. To her, by right of inheritance, the younger man owed many of the traits that were so widely different from others derived from the gentle, devout father whom he succeeded as the head of the family.

Thomas[3] Harris, the emigrant, and father of the line in this country, was born in Ottery Saint Mary, Devonshire, Eng-

land, in 1637, the son of Thomas,[2] born there about 1606, and the grandson of John,[1] of Aylesbury and Ottery Saint Mary. He belonged to the Established Church at home, but soon after his arrival in Boston, about 1675, became a member of the Old South Church. He left an only son, Benjamin,[4] whose only son, Cary,[5] left an only son, William,[6] whose only son was the Dorchester minister, the father of the subject of this sketch.

Thaddeus William Harris was born in Dorchester, Nov. 12, 1795, the eldest child of Thaddeus Mason Harris, by his wife, Mary (Dix).

He was fitted for college at Dedham and Bridgewater, at the latter place under the kindly care of the Rev. Dr. Zedekiah Sanger. He entered Harvard College in 1811, in his sixteenth year, graduating with his class in 1815. It is said of him that while in college he was timid and sensitive, rather a nervous and recluse youth; but it is probable that this reputation was due more to his habits of retirement than to timidity. Certainly, later in life this trait was not prominent in his character.

In the class of 1815 were graduated several who in after years became associated with Dr. Harris at Cambridge in the university, and with whom he enjoyed the privileges of frequent intercourse, — President Jared Sparks, Professors Convers Francis, John Gorham Palfrey, and Theophilus Parsons, — while the Revs. Richard M. Hodges and George G. Ingersoll were also residents of the same city. With one classmate, Mr. Charles Briggs, he was on terms of peculiar intimacy, and the warm friendship existing between them endured through many after years of their lives.

Immediately after graduation Mr. Harris commenced the study of medicine, received his medical degree from Harvard College in 1820, and commenced practice in the town of Milton, in connection with Dr. Amos Holbrook.

In 1824 he was married to Catherine, the youngest daughter of Dr. Holbrook, who still survives. He probably at that time, and until somewhat later, contemplated no departure from his profession. His elder associate, now his father-in-

law, was one of the most eminent practitioners of his day. Harvard College had in 1813 conferred upon Dr. Holbrook the honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine, and his widely known skill and strong personal attractions had brought to him a large and extended practice. To this Dr. Harris must have naturally looked forward to succeeding, but it appears that other influences were weighing with him which resulted before many years in his ultimate abandonment of the profession. During the preparation for his medical life he had paid some attention to the study of botany, and as early as 1819 we find him carrying on an animated discussion by letter with Dr. Dow, of Dover, New Hampshire, on botanical and entomological questions in their relations with *Materia Medica*. This is the first recorded evidence of a decided or pronounced taste in the direction which his studies of later years assumed. As a physician he certainly possessed many natural traits which should have won for him a high place in the profession. It is possible that the reserve which has been noticed as a distinguishing feature in his college life, which did not disappear in after years, and of which he must have been conscious, may have seemed to him an obstacle to his success. Perhaps he felt that the broad field of nature, to which he was looking forward with ever-increasing interest, was his proper sphere. Certain it is that his charge had grown distasteful to him, and when, in 1831, the position of Librarian to the University was offered him, it was gladly accepted. Here, then, his life as a medical man ended, and his career as a naturalist in the broadest signification of the term, properly began. From this time forward his interests and efforts, interwoven as they were by force of circumstances, moved in three channels. As an officer of the college he was no less zealous and active in the discharge of his duties than keen and thorough in his researches in the natural sciences, or accurate and systematic in his antiquarian studies. Each shared his attention. To the first were given conscientiously and honestly the hours of daylight necessary to the performance of his official work; to the others he brought all the time that could be wrested from sleep and recreation. The

library at that time numbered but thirty thousand volumes, and occupied Harvard Hall. In 1840 it was transferred to Gore Hall, then newly erected; and upon its arrangement and classification in the new quarters he bestowed the solicitude and care that were a part of his nature. At his death it had increased to sixty-five thousand volumes, for that day a most respectable collection, and one of the most important in the country. To the office of librarian Dr. Harris brought habits of precision and method, a disciplined and scholarly mind, and a wide range of general and scientific information. To those who visited the library for purposes of study and research he was always accessible, and his advice, suggestions, and assistance were freely given them. He was admirably adapted by taste and education for the position in which he now found himself. He possessed, in addition to his extensive knowledge of many branches of the natural sciences, a keen love for and appreciation of the fine arts, was an interested student in geography and history, a good classical scholar, and a fair mathematician. It seems probable from his correspondence at that period of his life that for the first few years of his residence in Cambridge the duties of the office were not arduous, giving him larger opportunities for study and observation than he enjoyed later. How well he used these opportunities the result of his life's work makes apparent; but as the years went on, the growth of the library and its limited means for employing additional aid made greater and increasing demands upon his time and strength. That he recognized this fact, and deplored his inability to wander outside the strictly defined lines of his duty as librarian, is made evident by his published correspondence. It would appear that for the last years of his life he yielded to the inevitable, and became more and more absorbed in his official duties. At the expiration of twenty-five years of service, his work, by his death, passed into the hands of his successor, himself a member of this Society, and the associate and friend of Dr. Harris for fifteen years.

In historical and kindred matters Dr. Harris was a student rather than a writer. As happily expressed by Colonel

Higginson, in his memoir published by the Boston Society of Natural History in 1869, "He had a genuine love of antiquarian research, though always kept under by the greater attraction of natural science." At one time he made a careful study of the early voyages of discovery and settlements upon the North American coast, but only detached notes on the subject are found among his papers. His knowledge of the history of the aborigines of the continent was extensive, and his interest in the subject never abated. As a genealogist he was a most cautious and thorough investigator, but unfortunately gave but little of his work to the public. With Savage he maintained a vigorous and voluminous correspondence, and the existing letters of the former, with their replies, form in themselves alone a most remarkable commentary on the industry and exhaustive research of both. He seemed to possess an instinct for unerringly tracing a genealogy, and the wandering individual who was encountered in his search was almost as surely and correctly assigned his proper place in the line of family descent, as was the wary insect allotted in his cabinet its true order and genus. An article published in the Boston "Courier" of July 29, 1847, on Stephen Daye, the Cambridge printer, is his earliest published historical paper that has been found, if we except the extended biographical notice of Dr. Amos Holbrook, written for the "Boston Medical and Surgical Journal" of 1842. In 1848 he wrote for the "New England Historical and Genealogical Register" a paper on the Josselyn Family of Massachusetts, and left at his death an incomplete genealogy of the Hugh Mason family of Watertown. The manuscript of the latter has been copied and deposited in the library of the New England Historic-Genealogical Society.

He was made an honorary member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1846, and, as has been already stated, a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1848.

But it was as a naturalist that Dr. Harris was best and most widely known. Into the pursuit of this science he flung himself with an ardor and zeal that lasted while strength and

health were vouchsafed him. It is said of him that during his college life he was not noted for any special love for natural sciences, further than being a good scholar in chemistry and philosophy. But certainly as early as in 1820 he was closely studying the habits of certain insects and plants in connection with his medical pursuits, and it is not unlikely that his attention had been drawn in those directions at even an earlier date. It was in that year that his father published a work entitled the "Natural History of the Bible," which became a standard both here and in Europe, and in its preparation it is probable that the younger man aided the elder. A little later he was a member of the examining committee in chemistry for his *Alma Mater*, and after Professor Peck's death in 1822, he reviewed with his father the manuscripts left by that scientist with a view to their publication. As early as in 1820 he commenced the formation of his elaborate entomological collection, which is now the property of the Boston Society of Natural History, an organization in which he evinced a strong interest, and to which for many years he was attached as a member. During his residence in Milton, and before his assumption of the librarian's duties, he was an indefatigable collector, and it was during that period that his cabinet received its largest accessions. Botany possessed for him always a peculiar charm, but in the comparatively unexplored field of American entomology he felt that he was master, and devoted to the study the larger part of his leisure hours.

In 1831 he prepared the Catalogue of Insects embraced in Hitchcock's State Report, a work of much importance in its time, and which excited among scientific men no little interest. This catalogue was the first systematic attempt made in this country to enumerate and classify American insects, and stood for many years as authority for the nomenclature of genera and species. The success that attended the result of this effort was very largely attributable to the author's familiarity with the works of Latreille, Olivier, and other entomologists of European reputation.

In 1837 he took charge of the department of Natural His-

tory in the university, the professorship of which was vacant, and performed the duties of the chair until the appointment of a permanent instructor five years afterward. In this connection it may not be improper to quote from Colonel Higginson's memoir the impression left upon his mind by Dr. Harris's instructions at that period. "In him there lived for us the very spirit of Linnæus, or whatever name best represents the simplest and purest type of the naturalist. . . . Dr. Harris was so simple and eager; his tall, spare form and thin face took on such a glow and brightness; he dwelt so lovingly on antennæ and tarsi, and handled his little insect martyrs so fondly, that it was enough to make one love this study for life beyond all branches of natural science." If this sketch of Dr. Harris as he stood in the lecture-room is truthful, it is equally so of him in his outings. Indelibly fixed upon the writer's memory are the recollections of the bright, sunny days spent with him in rambling over the beautiful country about Belmont and Waltham; of the sudden rushes after some flying Buprestis, or the wary chase of some shy Cynthian: of the bark-stripping in search of the Curculio larva, and the search in the meadow pools for the Dytiscus. And sometimes net would be dropped and a stone wall scaled that an old, mossy grave-stone in a forgotten burying-ground could be cleaned and its epitaph transcribed in the note-book. On such occasions every passing insect and every way-side plant furnished a text for such lessons as only he could give. And through it all, ran that thorough delight in the subject, and the tenderness, almost feminine, for everything that the Creator had made, that were so markedly a part of his being.

In 1837 he was appointed by the Legislature of the State of Massachusetts one of a Commission for a scientific survey of the State, and in this connection he prepared his "Report on Insects Injurious to Vegetation," which was published at the charge of the State in 1841, afterward in 1852 in a revised edition, and again in 1862 in an enlarged and illustrated form under the editorship of Mr. Charles L. Flint, the Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture. This work in its completeness is a fitting monument to the

knowledge and industry of its author. As a popular treatise on injurious insects it is without a rival, even after a lapse of forty years from its publication. In it the rare talent of the man for exact observation and lucidity of statement is as evident as his broad acquaintance with the subject. It became a text-book in the families of the more intelligent agriculturists of New England, and a ready helper to every student of entomology in the land.

Nor did his active work as an author rest here. The Boston Society's memoir furnishes a list of one hundred and four published papers from his pen, bearing upon the subject of entomology; and subsequent searches of Dr. Hagen, the learned entomologist of the Cambridge Museum, have materially swelled the list. In 1869 the same Society honored him with the publication, in a handsome octavo of over three hundred pages, of selections from his scientific correspondence under the careful editorship of Mr. Samuel H. Scudder. How well this work was done, and with what delicacy and rare judgment, must be apparent to every one who has read it, and who knew Dr. Harris.

In botany he was always an eager student. In 1840 he published a scientific list of native plants found in the vicinity of Boston. Late in his life he made a careful study of the cultivated squashes, and left in manuscript a carefully prepared though incomplete treatise on the subject, enriched with many original sketches. For several seasons his garden — next to his collection the delight of his life — was filled with squashes, pumpkins, and gourds of every conceivable shape, size, and color. Seeds came to him from all quarters of the globe, and their products formed a collection as unique as it was interesting.

Dr. Harris's collection of insects passed after his death into the hands and careful custody of the Boston Society of Natural History. In 1837 he himself wrote, "Should death surprise me before the results of my labors are before the public, I shall leave an exhaustive, well-arranged, and named collection which . . . will remain as a standard of comparison when I am gone." It was commenced in 1820, and until

his death received constant accessions and his watchful care. It remained, as he said, "a standard of comparison."

As a naturalist Dr. Harris stood in the front rank. Agassiz said of him that "he had few equals even if the past were included in the comparison"; and one of the most distinguished of American botanists wrote of him, "Of other genuine naturalists I have read, but he is the only one I ever knew."

With but few exceptions the contemporaries of Dr. Harris in the natural sciences are now dead, and of the younger generation who have taken their places few knew him personally. Accompanying the Boston Society's memoir is a portrait engraved by Halpin, which, if not wholly satisfactory, is a fair likeness of him as he appeared at the age of fifty. In person he was tall, measuring full six feet in height, but his spare, thin frame gave him the appearance of even greater stature. He was rarely unwell, and his last sickness was the only occasion in many years when he was confined even to the house by illness. All his life he suffered to some extent with nervous headaches, probably the result of continued and close application to his studies with corresponding want of exercise and recreation. His powers for work seemed exhaustless. He apparently needed no rest. His life was one of untiring activity, and of constant occupation. No man ever knew better the value of time, or how best to economize it. All his efforts were directed to some well-defined purpose, and this was undoubtedly the reason that he was able to accomplish in his lifetime such an amount of varied and useful work. The reader of Colonel Higginson's memoir might draw the inference that to Dr. Harris, at least, his life was an unsatisfactory or unhappy one. Such was very far from being the fact. While not possessing a buoyant and ardent temperament, he was ever cheerful and composed. If in occasional private letters to those who were in close sympathy with him in his scientific pursuits he expressed grief and disappointment at his inability to devote his entire time to the studies that so largely engrossed his thoughts, he did not suffer that feeling to embitter his life or to cramp his energies for

work. He was by nature a silent, reserved man, and, as he passed middle life, it is possible that he grew more absorbed in his own thoughts and less open to approach than in his younger days.

Allusion has been made in the early part of this memoir to the mother of Dr. Harris. She was a woman of great energy and firmness, and from her he inherited his force of character, with a certain degree of sternness which perhaps increased in his later years. There was a warm bond of sympathy between these two, so much alike. Their interviews in her old age (for she lived until the year 1852) were characterized by an old-fashioned tender courtesy rather than by an effusive display of affection, which would have been foreign to the nature of each.

Of all men he was one of the most simple and unostentatious in his tastes, habits of life, dress, and manners. He had an intense hatred of all shams and deceit. In conversation he was simple and unaffected, simple in thought and expression, and thoroughly earnest and sincere in all his doings. For the science to which he devoted so large a portion of his thoughts he possessed an enthusiasm that seemed almost at variance with his nature. Nothing else could arouse it, if his love for natural scenery is excepted. In the fields or on the mountains he was like another man. He thoroughly enjoyed his brief vacations, in latter years spent mostly in the White Mountains. His delight in the contemplation of the beautiful and majestic scenery of that locality was ever as fresh and intense as at first.

To his fellow naturalists, and to the younger students in the sciences who sought his aid, he always threw open his resources to their fullest extent. His correspondence with the former, at home and abroad, covered the full period of his professional life; many of these were his friends of long standing, and with some — notably among them the eminent British entomologist, Edward Doubleday — he was on terms of peculiar intimacy. As Colonel Higginson so well says of him, "He would give whole golden days of his scanty summer vacations to arranging and labelling the collections of

younger entomologists." After the publication of his "Treatise," and in fact until his life was ended, he was the recipient of constant calls and communications from agriculturists and others seeking information concerning habits of destructive insects and the proper remedies for their extinction; and many an old farmer who had travelled miles to bring him a newly discovered cabbage-pest, or a strange wheat-fly, was sent away from his house delighted with the story of insect life, and the practical hints that he received from the reserved but courteous gentleman who had welcomed him with the dignity and politeness of a by-gone age.

As a writer Dr. Harris possessed a peculiarly happy faculty. His chief work, although treating of a subject difficult to handle without the use of many technical and professional terms, is singularly simple and attractive in its style. He possessed also a rare accomplishment, that of easily and correctly delineating his subject with pencil and brush. Some of his insect sketches were finished with a skill and minute detail which would have done credit to a professional artist, and all of them evince the possession of great natural gifts in that direction. For some of the fine arts he had decided tastes, and his architectural drawings made for his own pleasure, or for some immediate practical use, were as excellent in their way as his sketches from natural objects.

Dr. Harris died at his home in Cambridge on the morning of the 16th of January, 1856. After a long life of strength and health and usefulness it would seem to have been but fitting could he have folded his hands and enjoyed even for a brief while a rest so well earned. But when the end came it found him still "in the harness." His associate in the librarian's duties had just left his sick chamber, after an interview on business matters connected with the office, when he suddenly expired.

Dr. Harris received the degrees of A.B. and A.M. from Harvard College in course, and the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1820. He was a member of the Massachusetts Medical Society, of the American Academy of Arts and Sci-

ences, of the Massachusetts Historical Society, of the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, and of the Boston Society of Natural History; a corresponding member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia; an honorary member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and a corresponding member of the London Entomological Society.

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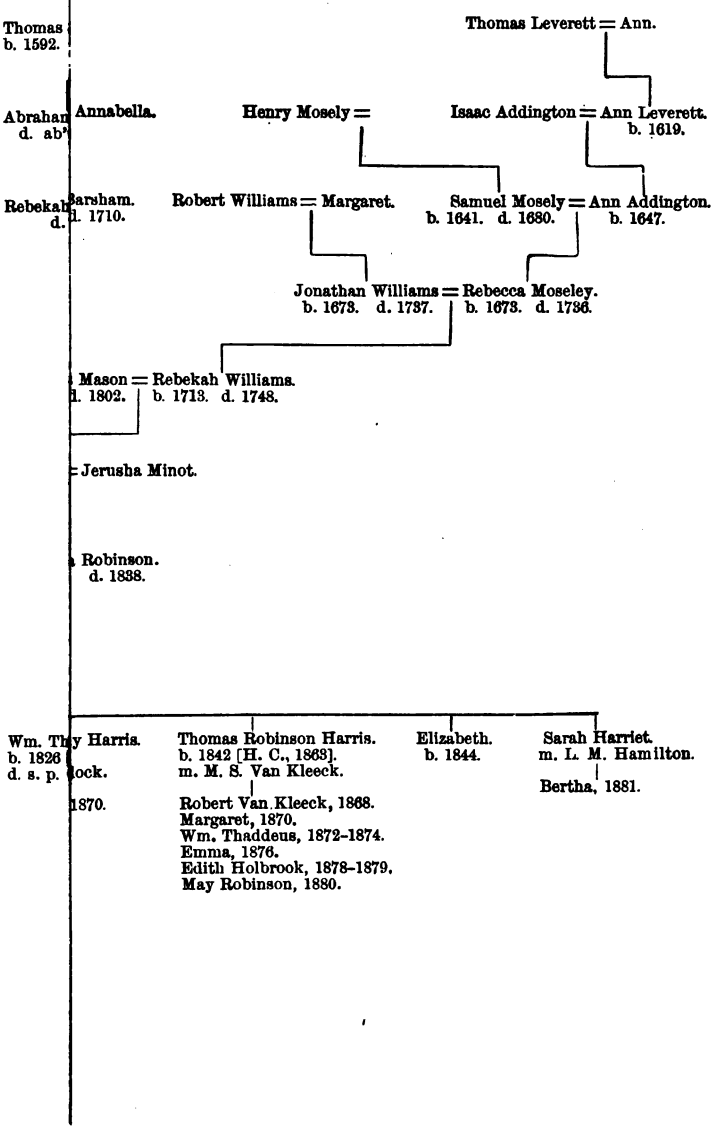
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Samuel Mosely = Ann Addington.
b. 1641. d. 1680.
b. 1647.
Jonathan Williams = Rebecca Moseley.
b. 1673. d. 1737.
b. 1673. d. 1736.
Mason = Rebekah Williams.
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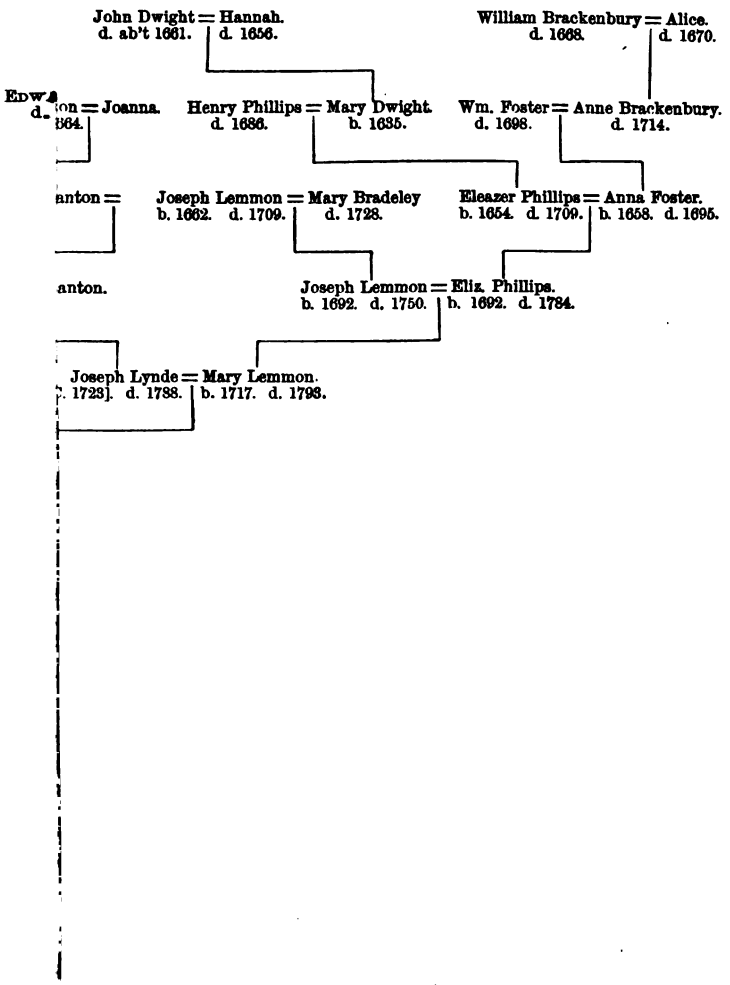
Thomas Robinson Harris.
b. 1842 [H. C., 1863].
m. M. S. Van Kleeck.
Robert Van Kleeck, 1868.
Margaret, 1870.
Wm. Thaddeus, 1872-1874.
Emma, 1876.
Edith Holbrook, 1878-1879.
May Robinson, 1880.
Elizabeth.
b. 1844.
Sarah Harriet.
m. L. M. Hamilton.
Bertha, 1881.

LLIAM HARRIS, M. D.


John Dwight = Hannah.
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Henry Phillips = Mary Dwight.
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Wm. Foster = Anne Brackenbury.
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Joseph Lemmon = Mary Bradeley
b. 1662. d. 1709. d. 1728.
Eleazer Phillips = Anna Foster.
b. 1654. d. 1709. b. 1658. d. 1695.
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Joseph Lemmon = Eliz. Phillips.
b. 1692. d. 1750. b. 1692. d. 1784.
Joseph Lynde = Mary Lemmon.
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